

Nancy M. White
Chair, Macomb County Board of Commissioners
2005 State of the County Address
March 10, 2005

Good afternoon.

Today, I'm so very pleased to welcome you all to what has become a tradition, an opportunity to reflect on past accomplishments and achievements in Macomb County.

It's a time to look forward with anticipation on the even greater things ahead as a strong and united group of communities.

Let me begin by acknowledging that the efforts that have brought Macomb County to this point in history are a result of so many in this room who have made it their passion to serve the people of this great county. Among those are the so-called "veteran" commissioners ... please stand, won't you?

Another important reason for our continued growth and prosperity in Macomb County is the intentional renewal of our county government leadership ... a renewal that takes the form of new commissioners recently elected to serve. Those of you who have taken that mantle of leadership, demonstrating your commitment to service, will you please stand?

As important as we think our role might be ... everyone here realizes the critical role county employees play in achieving our overall objectives.

Even as we acknowledge the contribution of commissioners to the process of building community in Macomb County, we must also acknowledge past contributions of people like Ralph Liberato, our long-time friend and fellow commissioner who served with distinction. We mourn Ralph's passing as we remember how he was actively engaged in his work as an elected official and his passion in helping the labor force. There's no greater legacy than to realize a person's life work will continue to be of benefit to us all, for years to come.

And we're very pleased to welcome Ralph's nephew Jerry Bologna (and Jerry's daughter, Ralph's great niece Natasha. Both have come here to share in our remembrance of those contributions. Thank you for being here.

Also remembered in our hearts and our minds are the fallen members of our community who gave their lives this past year in the pursuit of a free Iraq:

- Marine Lance Corporal Allan Klein, of Clinton Township;
- Marine Staff Sergeant Jason Lehto, of Warren;
- Marine Corporal In Chul Chin, of Warren;
- Marine Corporal Gentian Marku, of Warren;
- State department agent Edward Seitz, of St. Clair Shores;
- and Army Private Mark Barbret, of Shelby Township.

At this time, I'd like to ask General Richard Elliott, commander of Selfridge Air National Guard Base, to please stand and join the servicemen and women who are here today representing units serving in Iraq and elsewhere in the Middle East as we recognize your service to our country:

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- Lt. Col. Tom Doman - Marine Wing Support Group 47;
- Technical Sgt. Tom Nunley, 127th Airlift Group;
- Capt. Chris Melka, 107th Fighter Squadron;
- and SK1 Sharon Heaton, SSB2 Fuels, Navy Reserves.

Finally, let us honor the memory, not only of the late Commissioner Liberato and the members of our armed services who have served or are serving in Iraq, but also the more than two hundred thousand victims of the Asian tsunami disaster.

Today, we witness our endless struggle to find peace as we deal with war as well as the wrath of nature. Join me please in a moment of silence where we offer a prayer of peace for so many troubled hearts.

Thank you.

Throughout these times of difficulty, it's clear that we are a community that steps forward to respond to the human need. Such was the case when so many county officials and employees alike contributed more than fourteen thousand dollars and were joined by three community businesses that matched an additional five thousand dollars toward the tsunami relief effort to help the children affected by that natural disaster.

Of special note are Dominic Abbate, president of Wakely Associates; Roy Rose, president of Anderson, Eckstein and Westrick, and Nasser Beydoun, president of Project Control Systems. Your generosity and demonstration of community spirit will not soon be forgotten. Dominic and Roy, I know you're here with us today. Please stand and let us thank you personally.

In the last few minutes, I've taken the time to reflect on the contributions of the many that have made Macomb County ... and our world ... a better place.

As important as it is to look back, it's the looking ahead that's even more important. And it's the looking ahead I want to share with you today.

Even so, we also need to remember those past accomplishments.

In a number of very key areas, your County government has made significant achievements on behalf of our citizens. Achievements which we can all take pride in bringing to the attention of those same citizens.

Those achievements are, in fact, so extensive that we've produced a more complete list for your review of several of our departments. Also in that document, and again for your benefit, we've included contacts and resources related to a number of key issues and areas that we believe will be of interest to you.

One achievement in 2004 that immediately comes to mind relates to the very important financial services sector.

I'm quite sure today's sponsor, Huntington Bank, will join all the other bankers in the room in appreciating the fact that our creditworthiness as a County improved in 2004, the result in part of a concerted effort to do so.

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Our demonstration of our fiscal responsibility resulted in the investment community, and specifically the Standard & Poors bond rating service, giving our bond issues a Triple A rating, echoing the earlier rating by Moody's that I shared with you last year. This elevates Macomb County to a position that is enjoyed by only thirty-five counties in the entire country, putting us in the top one percent.

What does that mean to the County as a whole? Not only does this testify to the good management your government enjoys, we believe it signals to the business community that Macomb County is a smart choice for new and expanding ventures, notably because our fiscal values are consistent with established business practices. In short, we speak the language of business.

We're open to enterprise in the way we function.

Our sensitivity to the needs of business was further demonstrated by the purchase of three properties adjacent to our county administration building in Mount Clemens. In addition to facilitating even more growth in the core of our county seat, this move also allows for much-needed parking space which supports that commercial activity.

Also in the area of real estate infrastructure development, Macomb County acquired a 106,000 square foot warehouse and office facility near Hall Road and Gratiot.

Additionally, we broke ground for our new public works headquarters near the VerKuilen Campus.

Plus we continued the development of plans for a new 42nd District Court building.

All these initiatives reflect on the financial health of our County. But it's also more. It demonstrates in very practical terms that we share a commitment to the kind of sound government infrastructure that will serve the county as we continue to grow and prosper.

At the same time, our residents are poised to see improvements in their physical health as well. One highlight of that is the new County Health Plan initiative we entered into late last year. It's a move that follows Governor Granholm's announcement of a program for Macomb County that allows us to leverage federal health care dollars with those previously budgeted for the indigent. The result is new funding of some \$2.9 million in the first year, resources we will use to expand primary health care services, including preventive health measures, to residents with lower incomes.

Our commitment to making services accessible to all in Macomb County will be further enhanced as we seek to partner with small business owners in providing basic health insurance to those who can least afford it. That's a critical priority in my view: that we support our business community in this regard.

The bottom line for us is to provide all residents of Macomb County with the services they need, and in doing so, to continue enriching our community.

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Last year, I updated you on the progress we enjoyed with a program, established five years ago, for seniors to experience relief in their cost of prescription drugs. Today, the Board of Commissioners can take pride in seeing that initiative expanded to embrace residents between the ages of 18 and 59 who otherwise would have no prescription insurance coverage.

The result is that we are now seeing more than one million prescriptions filled – drug coverage where none existed that amounts to nearly \$50 million in total. Residents of Macomb County have saved more than \$15 million in the cost of their prescriptions under this plan, about one-third of what the total would have been without this valued service.

And that, my friends, is one more reason for Macomb County residents to celebrate: knowing that we are creating an enriching community that cares for its citizens.

We're furthering that emphasis in improving the health of our residents through the installation of automatic external defibrillators throughout county facilities. Health authorities acknowledge that the use of this equipment within the first three minutes of someone suffering a heart attack can dramatically improve their survival rate.

This program is in large part due to the efforts of Rich Gasowski, who not only initiated the idea itself, but who brought it to life with the policy and procedures required. Rich has also helped spread the idea to other jurisdictions, including Oakland County as well as some of our cities and townships. Excellent work, Rich. We're going to miss you greatly when you retire this July.

But I can also assure you: what won't change is our commitment to do everything we can to keep our citizens healthy. And when we need to send emergency services to someone needing help, that means knowing exactly where they are, even if the originating point of the emergency call isn't from a traditional land line phone.

With Phase Two of our 9-1-1 capabilities, emergency dispatchers will be able to pinpoint the location of a cell phone call, an initiative that takes public safety to a new level entirely. The half million dollars spent on this major enhancement means our citizens can have a higher confidence that their call for help will be answered in a prompt and efficient manner.

Our commitment to public health was also demonstrated last year by the emergency provision of some six thousand flu vaccines in a two day period last November.

I want to take just a moment to personally thank and recognize the outstanding professionals we have working with us in our Health Department. The danger, of course, in recognizing any one group is that we tend to overlook the contributions of others that tirelessly work for the benefit of us all. I assure you that's not the case here, and once again, I bring to your attention our

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more detailed handout, which highlights the many areas where our county employees have stepped up to the plate in order to serve our citizens.

But I want to spend the rest of my time here today giving you a glimpse into the future of Macomb County. I'm excited about doing that because our future is a bright one. We have, as a "community of communities," every reason to celebrate our current successes as we'll be celebrating our future accomplishments ... of this I am sure.

Certainly part of that forward thinking comes as a result of the hiring by our Board of Commissioners of a public affairs director and an ombudsman. We're very fortunate to have people of the professional caliber of Phil Frame and John Eddings ... people who are enhancing our visibility and our accessibility.

And let me say this: I believe the hiring of Mr. Eddings, the first Ombudsman for our county, especially at a time when we have initiated a revamping of our hiring practices, speaks to our commitment to be accountable in every respect. And I know that John will keep us on the straight and narrow.

Phil and John, please stand and let us recognize you and the important positions you represent.

Both have contributed greatly to our visibility and accessibility as they make progress in our community and media outreach.

One last mention before I shift into "future" mode today.

Al Lorenzo, who as president of Macomb Community College is a member of the Macomb County extended family, is here today as my guest. As you well know, Macomb Community College celebrated its fifty year anniversary in 2004, a milestone that deserves recognition, especially in light of the half million students the educators there have seen go through their doors since its inception. Indeed, Macomb Community College continues to greatly contribute to the stature of our county. Thank you, Al, for being here.

I also want to recognize another very important educational institution in our County. Baker College, represented here today by President Don Torline, is a critical partner in our efforts to raise the educational bar for the citizens of Macomb. Thank you Don for being here as well.

As great as our accomplishments as a county have been, it's my fervent and passionate belief that we'll have even more reason to celebrate this time next year. We have not only a vision, but a sense of purpose and a strategy that we're carrying forward into 2005 and beyond ... initiatives that we believe will propel Macomb County into a new era of prosperity and commitment to serve everyone who shares our home.

And when I say "everyone" I do mean everyone ... regardless of ethnic or racial origin or any number of distinguishing factors that might once have been seen as reasons to exclude, not embrace.

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Today's Macomb County may not be perfect, but we are committed to being a place to live, to work, to play, and to learn ... a place that is ... by intention and purpose ... where all of us can be at home.

Much has been said about the changing character of our economy ... changes that become even more challenging when you consider that human nature abhors change of any kind, even if the changes are inherently good for us. Having said that, we acknowledge that the percentage of our economy that is tied to the manufacturing industry is changing. Indeed, some would point out that our County has lost more manufacturing jobs than some entire states, not a good thing in anyone's book.

In what is essentially a hyper competitive economy, we ... and many communities around us ... find the level of business activity related to traditional manufacturing, long the mainstay of the Michigan economy ... dropping ... and sometimes dropping dramatically. This is a fact, something no one can dispute.

What progressive leaders are doing ... leaders like those here who serve Macomb County ... is to identify the areas of inherent strength that will drive us forward.

Governor Granholm, as you all know, has proposed bold new initiatives to deal with the changing economic realities ... initiatives that include making our region a key place where emerging industries and technologies can root...and grow. These include biotechnology, life sciences, and of particular importance to the auto industry, the burgeoning alternative fuel industry and what is sure to be an enabling part of our new economy. We intend to be highly competitive in positioning Macomb County as a home of choice for these industries.

Even as we seek to position ourselves for the future, we're not prepared to stand by and watch while existing sectors of our economy slip away. One example of that is the very important defense sector, notably represented by the Selfridge Air National Guard Base in Harrison Township and the Army's Detroit Arsenal in Warren. Our steadfast efforts to keep both facilities off any closure list is being led by a Community Action Committee, ably chaired by Peggy Mazzara, which has brought together in a business, community and government initiative some of the best minds anywhere.

Even as those efforts continue, I want to take a moment to acknowledge the representatives of the Arsenal, known to some of us as TACOM. We are proud to have you as part of our community and proudly recognize your critical role in supporting our service men and women in Iraq and around the world.

At this time, I'd like to introduce four members of our TACOM Life Cycle Management Command who are here with us today:

- Colonel Donald Kotchman of the P-E-O Ground Combat Systems;
- Mr. Tim Tarczynski of TARDEC;
- Ms Agnes Holley of the Integrated Logistics Support Center;
- and Mr. Art Siirila of the Acquisition Center.

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As those who defend our country look out on a global basis, even here at home we're taking a world view as far as increasing our own stature. Notably, that played out in our active participation in a trade mission to the Middle East in December, an initiative that positioned Macomb County as a very attractive place to do business.

Our business leaders, including Roy Rose and Dominic Abbate who we recognized earlier, returned with great enthusiasm and optimism for the potential of new business coming to Macomb County as a result of our contacts there. Indeed, I can say that we came away with a number of very real opportunities to do business in Dubai, a key gateway for not only the United Arab Emirates but for the entire region that includes Doha, Qatar, where we also made important contacts for the future.

If those names seem ... well ... foreign ... consider that Doha plans to erect some 200 skyscrapers in the next two years. And Dubai is building what will be the largest and second largest malls in the world, one of which will feature the world's longest indoor ski slope. And not only is it the largest in the world, we're also talking about a ski slope in the middle of the desert.

Go figure.

One thing is for sure: This is an entirely different environment we find ourselves in. Frankly, I'm excited and thrilled that we're able to embrace that new world and I want you to know here today that the Board of Commissioners at Macomb County ... the public servants who make it their life's calling to do just that ... to serve ... is committed to making our community of communities an even better place to live and work.

Al Lorenzo is one who said it aptly: "Macomb County people are great at working hard ... but now it's time to work smart."

We're not only ready to work smart ... we're already doing so. We're doing it through our Strategic Visioning Task Force, which was set up when I was elected chair of the Board of Commissioners in 2003.

In essence, we need to be clear about who we are, what we're about and how people can have a renewed confidence in what we can do. Clearly, those in this room who share our passion and commitment for seeing Macomb County continue to grow and prosper will agree with me: we all share a vital role in shaping our future.

I believe ... and I'm quite sure you will share that belief ... that our role needs to be one of active leadership. It's not enough to watch things happen. We need to set the course and do what's required to see our future come together. As such, we intend to move forward in key areas. In fact, we're continuing to move forward really because we've been embracing advancements in information technology for some time.

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As an aside, I had to chuckle recently when I read some of the coverage in the Detroit Free Press of my buddy Brooks Patterson and his own State of the County address.

Don't get me wrong, Brooks.

County-wide Wireless Internet access ... we call it WiFi of course ... is a great idea ... so great in fact that we're well on our way to making that a reality after beginning the initiative two years ago. That's one reason Governor Granholm recently appointed our own director of MIS, Cindy Zerkowski, to the board of the Michigan Broadband Authority. We have the expertise to get things done. The fact is, these improvements in our information technology infrastructure make it even more attractive for those ready to invest in a new economy and to make Macomb County their home.

We're moving forward in taking very real and deliberate steps in making sure those who think of Macomb County know and understand all we can offer as a community, not only as a place to do business, but as a "community of communities" where people can raise families and enjoy all life has to offer through our many recreational and cultural opportunities as well.

Part of that moving forward is being able to challenge one another in change. And I believe the Board of Commissioners plays a vital role in shaping our future in this new environment. In doing so, I want to challenge my colleagues.

The challenge is to create a "Top Ten" list of both short term and long term county "essentials," important issues that deserve our attention and need our support now and in the months and years ahead.

What I propose here today is the formation of a working group ... call it what you will ... that formulates those priorities in a cohesive, comprehensive, and all-encompassing manner, building on what's already been accomplished and taking us to the next level, ensuring all the way through that we are able to build on our strengths and stretch us beyond what we might otherwise think we're capable of accomplishing. These initiatives can and will work in sync with the goals of our task force as well as those of in-house and off-site professionals.

Let me close here today with an element of my own sense of vision for Macomb County, an opportunity I believe has the potential to jumpstart the way we manage our affairs.

And yes, those of you who were here last year may remember that I talked about the idea of a county executive. But before you tune me out, please indulge me for a moment.

The fact is ... and this is, indeed, a factual statement ... when we talked recently with a number of key Macomb County constituencies that were surveyed as part of an economic development initiative ... those constituencies brought forth an issue that was clearly at the top of their minds ... an issue that wasn't on any list of topics that we generated. That issue was the question of a county executive form of government.

Their point was clear: Not having a county executive is seen to be a deterrent to doing business in Macomb.

As I said earlier, no one likes change. It's not in our nature to embrace it. Yet the reality is that a structure of county government where an elected executive serves to spearhead initiatives is what is currently expected. It's expected...and even demanded among those who want a single point of contact in top-level discussions ... discussions that involve development, strategic initiatives and leader-led improvements, especially when we're playing on a global stage. At the same time, a County Executive, elected to a four-year term, would give the people we serve the continuity they need and depend on.

As strong as we are in Macomb County, as united as we may believe we are, the perception in the marketplace doesn't always fit our own sense of who we are and how we are seen. In short, it's courage that's needed in order for us to take the necessary action on this front. Someone once said, "Progress always involves risk. You can't steal second base and keep your foot on first." It's more than that, of course.

Folks, I encourage you today: Let's head for home base. There are changes we can make that recognize the importance of accountability, of consensus building and of broad-based representation. I believe we can move forward in taking the best from a County Executive form of government while retaining what makes our existing structure effective. But we need to begin talking about how that can occur.

It may take three or four years – we know that going into it. This doesn't need to happen right away, but we do need to start doing something about it, at least talking about the issue. For those of you with us today that make it your business to do business in Macomb County, this idea will demand your active participation. As county commissioners, the best we can do is to put a measure on the ballot.

But if you, those who are the driving force in our county, feel you would be better served by an executive form of government, you will need to step out, to help voters become aware, educated and motivated to make the change.

Let me once again thank the many people who make up our community of communities ... people who have contributed to making Macomb County in this last year a better place in which to live and work. Looking ahead to the year before us, I remain committed to doing even more ... with the help of those in this room ... and to bringing us even more reasons to celebrate our success.

Thank you for your friendship, your confidence, and your leadership as we move forward together.

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